



GREATER FORT ERIE COMMUNITY HUB FEASIBILITY STUDY - ABRIDGED¹

Date: February 2019

¹ The abridged version of The Greater Fort Erie Community Hub Feasibility Study is based on the full report and recommendations prepared by The McLean Consulting Group. The full report includes detailed analysis of citizen and organizations surveys, governance models and preliminary site options. It is available at <https://GFEHUB.ca>. The abridged version was prepared by the GFE Community Hub Steering Committee, which takes full responsibility for inadvertent errors or deviations from the full report.



An agency of the Government of Ontario
Un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Our Vision: “A Healthy, Inclusive, South Coast Community.”

Our Mission:

- **The South Coast Hub is building a space that dynamically engages people & strengthens our community.**
- **Through collaborative partnerships, we will promote efficient access to information & opportunities.**
- **The South Coast Hub creates community social cohesion.**

In January 2019, The McLean Consulting Group submitted The Greater Fort Erie Community Hub Feasibility Study to the Greater Fort Erie Community Hub Steering Committee (Steering Committee). The Study documents a comprehensive community needs analysis, preliminary examination of site options, consideration of governance models and recommendations for the establishment of a community hub.

The Steering Committee prepared the following *abridged* version of The Greater Fort Erie Community Hub Feasibility Study as a high-level summary of the rationale, process, analysis and recommendations of the full report.

The full report is available at <https://gfehub.ca>

GREATER FORT ERIE COMMUNITY HUB FEASIBILITY STUDY – ABRIDGED

INTRODUCTION

This study builds on the preliminary work of the Greater Fort Erie Community Hub Task Force, which consists of Advancing Crystal Beach, Beachcombers, Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre and the Town of Fort Erie.

BACKGROUND

In 2017, Advancing Crystal Beach (ACB) and the Beachcombers Seniors Association (Beachcombers) brought residents of Crystal Beach and Ridgeway together to discuss mutual concerns about services in the west end of Fort Erie:

- Recognizing that many Crystal Beach residents had difficulties travelling to medical and social appointments, ACB worked with medical, special needs, social, legal, educational and seniors' organizations to provide weekly or monthly services at the Crystal Ridge Community Church. Providers include organizations like Bridges Community Health Centre, Job Gym, Justice Niagara and Positive Living Niagara. By 2017, it was evident that the limited space available at the Church made it difficult to accommodate a full range of services and that ACB needed to develop alternative plans.
- During the same period, the Beachcombers Seniors Association realized it could not meet the needs of Greater Fort Erie's rapidly growing older adult population in its current location in Ridgeway. These needs include not only traditional social-recreational programs but also supports for shut-ins, people with physical and cognitive impairments, hospice support and caregiver support.

The two organizations recognized the need to enhance services and accessibility to meet the changing needs of current and new residents by forming the Greater Fort Erie Community Hub Task Force. The first step would be to assess community needs, examine space/location options and determine the feasibility of a centralized location for as-yet undetermined services.

Paralleling this process, the community was aware that the District School Board of Niagara had decommissioned and tendered two elementary schools for development and anticipated decommissioning the Ridgeway-Crystal Beach Secondary School at some point. The group decided to inform the Town of Fort Erie formally of its interest in establishing a hub within the community, with the need to find a suitable site down

the road. The Task Force presented their concept to Town Council in December 2017 to begin the process of relationship building and initial feasibility analysis.

In early 2018, the Task Force reached out to the Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre (FENFC) which operates an Indigenous Hub in Fort Erie's Crescent Park neighbourhood. FENFC brings experience in community development, grant applications, formal partnerships and government relations.

The Task Force applied for an Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) Seed Grant, submitted by ACB and formalizing the relationship of the three organizations through a Memorandum of Agreement. In August 2018, the OTF awarded \$75,000 to conduct a feasibility study and hire a Community Developer/Animator once the Steering Committee as made decisions based on the feasibility report.

After continuing discussions involving the Steering Committee, the Mayor, Councillors and senior Town staff, the Town assigned a senior Corporate manager to the Steering Committee and contributed to the project by hosting meetings, copying posters and linking with like-minded agencies.

In September 2018, the Steering Committee retained The McLean Consulting Group to conduct the feasibility study, including research, conduct interviews, review significant literature, and facilitate citizen and community agency surveys.

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

A community hub is a general term that describes a single point of access for service users and prioritizes the collaboration of organizations.

- Hubs create a community focal point where everyone can belong. Other descriptions include: shared space centres, location-based collaboration, centre-based collaboration, co-location, centre-based delivery, one-stop shops, and multi-agency centres.
- Hubs address barriers such as fragmentation of services, limited resources, difficulty navigating a system of uncoordinated supports, lack of collaboration amongst organizations, and duplication of services.
- Community hubs encourage wrap-around services. Clients can access multiple services in one place. They benefit from holistic needs assessments, faster referrals, reduced travel times, improved system navigation, and more efficient access to services. Better coordination reduces the amount of time spent knocking on doors and repeating their story to unconnected service providers.
- There is significant evidence related to the effectiveness of community hub type programs.

Some communities have built electronic hubs – online networks that link organizations, tracking referrals and setting collaborative outcomes. For this report, the focus will be on physical community hub buildings.

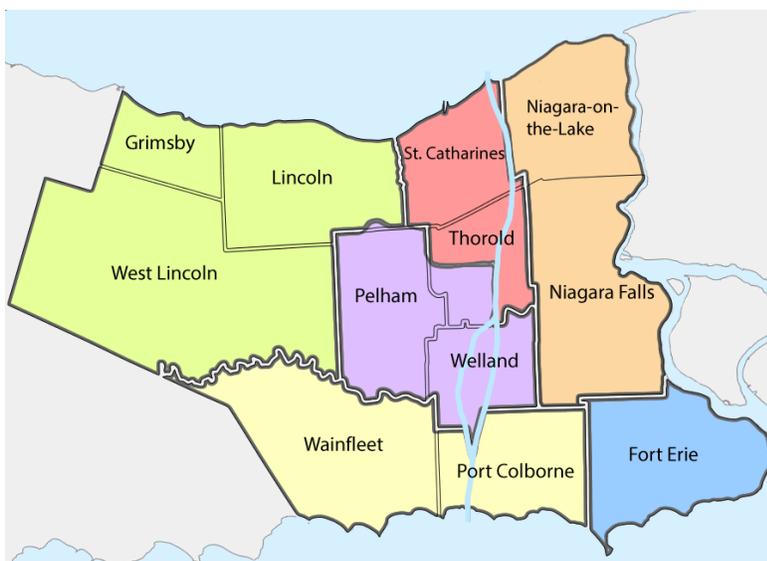
Hubs may be sector-focused, e.g. on recreation, culture, social service, medical, age or ethno-specific issues. Conversely, they may offer a more general focus that delivers a variety of human services that target various societal challenges with co-located programs such as employment services, domestic violence support, legal assistance, addictions programs and government agencies.

THE CONTEXT

Fort Erie is one of Niagara's fastest growing communities and has experienced a high level of residential and commercial development in the past few years. Since the 2016 Census, the Town has issued approximately 200 residential construction permits issued per year, representing 500 more residents annually.

Garrison Road (Niagara Regional Road 3) is the town's commercial corridor, stretching east to west through Fort Erie. Fort Erie is also home to other commercial core areas (Bridgeburg, Ridgeway, Stevensville, and Crystal Beach), which predate the 1970 amalgamation of Bertie Township and the village of Crystal Beach with Fort Erie.

Figure 1 Fort Erie is located at the South Coast of Niagara Region on Lake Erie



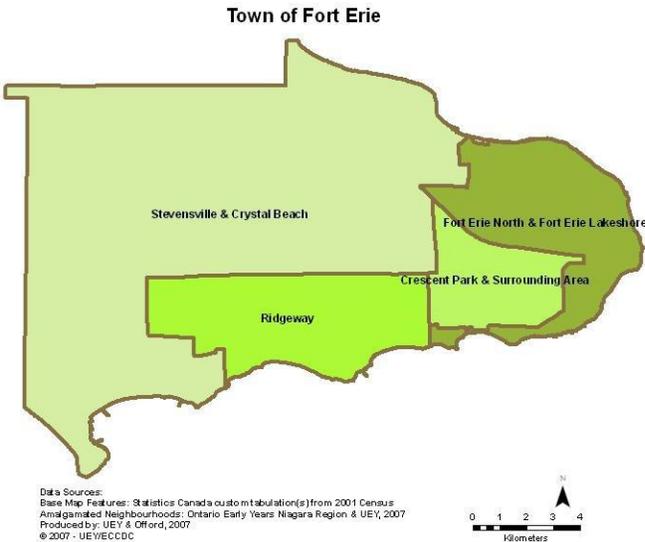
The neighbourhoods served by the commercial core areas have retained their identity. Today, the Town of Fort Erie is a collection of different and unique areas with diverse demographics, perspectives, and needs across its mix of urban and rural settings. Located at the “end” of the Queen Elizabeth Way, bisected by provincial Highway #3 and home to Canada’s busiest gateway to the United States via the Peace Bridge, it presents a changing face to residents, visitors and businesses alike.

These factors can create challenges for a common Vision in a Town with geographically dispersed communities and demographically/philosophically divergent communities. They also influence discussions regarding the need for renewed investment in community resources and infrastructure based on factors such as:

- Recent large developments
- Social determinants of health
- Emerging unique demographic needs or
- Lack of municipal investment in comparison to other neighbourhoods.

This report considers all these perspectives measured against the data in order to inform decision-making by the Steering Committee of the Greater Fort Erie Community Hub Task Force.

Figure 2 Map of Fort Erie and with neighbourhoods



To better understand the needs of the community, this research engaged a broad range of stakeholders, including residents, service providers, community leaders, community workers, elected officials, and their staff.

THE STUDY

Using multiple sources of data, the Greater Fort Erie Community Hub Task Force Feasibility Study will support future decision-making by the Task Force by:

- providing an in-depth understanding of the current deficits in community services and community spaces in the Town of Fort Erie, and
- assessing the feasibility of a community hub as an important step to addressing some of these deficits.

The report identifies, assesses, and prioritizes community needs; identifies community assets and resources; outlines demographic information; captures the unique needs of the area; identifies accessible locations for community space; records specific areas of interest and programming needs; establishes potential partnerships and identifies potential governance models.

The study includes 785 citizen surveys, 13 community organizational surveys, 4 community engagement sessions and 14 key-informant interviews identify prioritized perceived neighbourhood needs.

CITIZEN SURVEY

The Citizen Survey collected unique quantitative and qualitative data through 785 surveys completed online, in person or via paper-based submissions. The number of responses represents 2.5% of Fort Erie's approximately 31,000 residents, a rate well above statistical thresholds for validity. The survey respondents represent a sample of convenience, a common sampling technique based on available respondents.

The survey identified neighbourhood needs of a non-commercial nature that are not being substantially addressed now. (The need for medical services is now being addressed by the Town. The need for affordable housing may not be within the scope of the HUB)

Community Activities and Lifestyle

- More community meeting space
- A larger senior centre (e.g. for seniors' recreation and support services)
- Youth drop-in centre (e.g. for youth recreation)
- A gymnasium

- Arts and culture
- Education and training
- Newcomer services

Services

- Clothing/food bank
- Mental health services
- Substance abuse counselling
- Legal clinic
- Daycare (both child and adult)
- Service Ontario office
- Ontario Works office
- ODSP office

Stakeholders also gave input on potential locations, how far they were willing to travel to access a Hub and whether they would be prepared to offer financial and volunteer support. There was also an opportunity for general feedback which identified trends such as a concern about increased taxation to support a Hub, reminders not to duplicate services and suggestions regarding private/public partnerships.

Culture

A sustainable community has a strong identity which is partly a product of its cultural identity. Fort Erie is an historic community with thousands of artifacts stored out of public view because of lack of space. Sharing the attributes that make Fort Erie unique help to create and strengthen its cultural identity. Interpreting the stories of various sectors within Fort Erie helps to promote understanding and create a shared sense of pride.

Based on conversations with community members, we feel that a community hub would benefit from having general service space and space for cultural activities and museum artifact displays.

HUMAN SERVICE AGENCY SURVEY

The **Human Service Agency** survey was sent out via email invitation to 172 agencies who have stated that Fort Erie is part of their service catchment. The survey sought information about the interest in and need for a Community Hub, as well as the types of facilities that would encourage community partners to co-locate at the Hub.

- Fourteen (14) surveys were completed and 12 organizations requested a follow-up phone call. Only one organization expressed interest in being an “anchor agency” (committing to renting or purchasing space in the hub over the long-term).
- Nine organizations and groups indicated an interest in being an itinerant partner (partners who rent space out on an intermittent basis).
- Four organizations and groups indicated that they were looking for shared free or low-cost office, meeting and program space.

Many providers indicated an interest in having private office (approximately 150 square feet) space with computer and desk space plus furnishings to work and have conversations with clients. Other priority needs of service providers include:

- Offices and washroom
- Meeting space
- Program space for groups and for individuals
- storage/distribution space for community donations.
- Storage and display space for arts, and museum pieces.

LOCATION

In assessing feasibility, location and the perspective of the service user are critical to decision-making. The location must promote both physical and geographical accessibility. The hub should be centrally located in the community, convenient, to public transit if available and in a safe area. If possible, the hub should be close to other service providers that have not chosen to co-locate, to ensure easy referrals and close collaboration.

Medical and other services are currently concentrated in the Urban Core of Fort Erie.

Beachcombers Seniors and the Crystal Ridge Centre located in the western End of Fort Erie and the Fort Erie Conservation Club Inc. in the Stevensville Neighbourhood. There are two child care providers in Ridgeway but none in Crystal Beach. The western part of Fort Erie has few services, with limited social investment. The study results showed an overall preference to locate a hub in the Ridgeway-Crystal Beach areas.

The report presents three high-level potential scenarios that can be used to facilitate decision making by the Steering Committee. They have not been fully analyzed but do illustrate the pros and cons of each direction.

- *Scenario one* is utilizing the recently decommissioned Ridgeway-Crystal Beach High School and repurposing it for a Community Hub. There are many examples across the Province of Hubs being created in vacant schools.

- *Scenario two* is building on to already existing community assets such as the Crystal-Ridge Centre owned and operated by the Town of Fort Erie.
- *Scenario three* is a new build of a gymnasium and 17,000 square feet of office, kitchen, and meeting/medical space.

KEY FACTORS

ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION

Co-location in a community hub does not immediately result in a single model or level of collaboration.

- Collaboration within hubs requires consistent and continuing work: it is not organic
- Hub agencies that have a culture of collaboration always out-perform stand-alone agencies
- Collaboration between service providers is based on relationship building over a shared coffee break, with an overall focus on creating a positive environment inside of the hub. This level of collaboration requires a very little behaviour change.
- Community hubs that focus less on social interactions and more on the coordination of program activities and referrals amongst co-located organizations achieve a medium level of engagement, This level of collaboration requires modest behavioural changes on the part of individual service providers, and the sacrifice of some organizational autonomy.
- Finally, a high level of engagement, also referred to as integration, is evidenced by risk and reward sharing amongst organizations with individual organizations striving to enhance other agencies' capacities. In this situation, the community hub functions as its own entity, and has a collaborative positive impact on the community.

Collaboration at senior management and governance levels is essential to overcome barriers to frontline collaboration and effective service delivery. Co-location within a community hub is consistently cited as a strategy that improves inter-agency collaboration and assists in overcoming these barriers

GOVERNANCE

A clear governance model is vital to any successful collaboration within a community hub.

Some examples might include:

- A staff-led model, in which the hub is governed by the executive directors of co-located organizations, who also comprise the management of the hub, and implement all hub policies (only the FENFC has paid staff).
- A non-profit model with an elected board of directors (BOD) that would govern the community hub, particularly surrounding strategic direction and policy. In this approach, a lead agency or community hub manager would oversee the daily operations.

- A lead agency model, where the community hub is overseen and managed as a program of a single organization. The lead agency rents space to partners and the hub is overseen by the lead agency's BOD, with many in-hub committees and coordinators managing the daily operations.
- A resident steering committee, wherein the overseeing committee is comprised of equal representation of co-located agencies and local community residents. This model promotes shared ownership and encourages decision-making from local community leaders.
- Severed accountability models in which:
 - A trustee body holds decision-making power in legal and financial matters, while a BOD manages policies and programs or
 - Participant-based governance, where service users play a role in developing services and sit on the BOD.

SPACE

The report looks at options based on the following requirements in a facility totalling 17,000 square feet:

- 2,500 ft for itinerant services, waiting room/drop in a room with a coffee kiosk
- 1,500 ft for medical exam rooms and physio/workout room
- 3,000 ft hall and industrial kitchen
- 5,000 ft gymnasium
- 1,000 ft innovation centre
- 4,000 ft hallways, bathrooms, storage, loading dock

The analysis is based on information from developers and contractors with experience in both new build and renovation of older buildings to average the cost of build/renovation at approximately \$200 per square foot for a very basic building. Total cost of this scenario would be \$3.4 million dollars.

FUNDING AND BUDGETING

Studies recommend the need to seek opportunities for shared resources and pooled budgets amongst co-located organizations. Funding in silos promotes competition, rather than cooperation. This approach supports joint programs, shared administrative resources, and activities that enhance collaboration.

Clear, written agreements related to shared funding, approaches and resources must be approved by governance and senior management of all participating organizations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The report is intended to inform further action by the Steering Committee and thus makes the following conclusions and recommendations for consideration

The study finds that a community hub would be the most cost-efficient and impactful way to address community deficits including local space needs and service gaps in Greater Fort Erie. The model would provide an essential access point that can support youth, seniors, newcomers, individuals living alone, and families, enabling them to interact and become fully engaged, healthy, socially included, and active residents. A community hub would support collaboration, provide opportunities for referral and coordination, and work to improve collective impact by breaking down service silos and creating integrated supports to address the needs of the community.

- There is a demonstrated need for more services in the Town of Fort Erie.
- There is a need for continued effort and goodwill between the Steering Committee and the Town. The involvement and support of the Town will be critical if the Hub is to be a large venture as is currently being discussed. The involvement of the Steering Committee as a partner with the Town will ensure that the initiative has more than enough volunteerism, enthusiasm and citizen buy-in to bring the project to fruition.
- A Hub model is the most efficient method to bring needed programs and services to the community because it would bring professional services together under one roof and permit economies of scale (e.g. administrative, accommodation) in a relatively small community. Fort Erie is not large enough to support multiple, single service, full-time service provider/professional providers. However, there is evidence supporting the need for a variety of services and supports.
- It is feasible to create a Hub in Fort Erie. There is enough evidence of demand, community goodwill, financially accessible options, and partnering opportunities.
- The Steering Committee informed by conversations with the Town should decide on a governance model. The scenarios in this report suggest that the most efficient model would be that the Hub is a Town-owned asset that is managed by an incorporated non-profit Board of Directors; however, several alternatives are presented. The governance model will drive future grant applications, fundraising efforts, concept development, and partnerships.
- The Steering Committee would be well served to liaise with groups such as the John Howard Society Niagara who have proven expertise with social innovation.
- The Hub should be located in or in close proximity to Crystal Beach or in close proximity, i.e. in Ridgeway, based on social determinants of health evidence, transportation logistics, demographic evidence and survey results. Both neighbourhoods have fewer health and social support services than other areas of the Town. The north end of Fort Erie does

demonstrate need regarding social determinants of health, but those residents live closer to the services already available and do not face the transportation challenges in the westerly neighbourhoods. The fact is that service providers in Fort Erie do not have enough resources to meet community needs. This initiative concludes that services for the west end are the priority here, but that other communities should not be ignored.

- The Steering Committee needs to decide on the concept soon. Most importantly, do they think that they need to address the housing issues mentioned in the study and the survey or not? The answer to this question will drive location.
- If housing is seen as part of the Hub mandate, the location should be at the Ridgeway-Crystal Beach High School.
- If housing is not part of the Hub mandate, the location should be behind the library at the Crystal Ridge Community Centre since this is Townland adjacent to an existing outdoor park, library, banquet hall and skating rink with adjacent improvements underway.
- The Steering Committee and the Town should begin building a relationship with trusted developers well before the project is set to begin but after governance and concept have been decided. If the RCBHS is chosen, a developer with experience renovating high schools is critical as this is a specialized skill set
- The Hub should include a design to allow for the integration of medical services. Bridges Community Centre would be a natural tenant and perhaps an anchor tenant. The design should incorporate the ability to house ancillary health services and a multi-purpose workout gym
- The Hub should become the new meeting place for seniors and have Beachcombers as an anchor tenant
- The Hub should house social initiatives such as food/clothing bank. Advancing Crystal Beach and/or the Salvation Army could be anchor tenants. There should be a mix of private offices and cubicles for itinerant services
- There is an overwhelming demand for mental health/addictions services by all age groups and demographics in this geographic area. There must be a concerted effort to get both publicly funded and private counselling at the Hub
- The high demand for government services can be satisfied with a properly trained and informed reception staff. The reception area should also be a drop-in area that has a coffeeiosk. This would fulfill the huge demand for unstructured meeting space.
- Youth programming should not be overlooked. Perhaps the YMCA or Boys and Girls Club would rent space and provide child and youth activities. A multi-purpose sectional gymnasium would allow for recreational opportunities for the entire community including youth

- The Hub should include a social innovation area for entrepreneurs needing occasional office space. There should be a Board room for both these folks or any other community group that needs an official meeting space
- The Hub should be part of Fort Erie's ongoing efforts at reconciliation with the Indigenous community. The waiting room/informal/drop-in room should have maps, information, and displays that show the true history of the South Coast of Niagara. The Fort Erie museum could be an important partner in this effort as long as displays are educating our community that Indigenous people still maintain rights to the land and are a vibrant group today. Policy and procedures should be developed to ensure Indigenous people can feel at home in this Hub. Perhaps the name of the Hub might include some efforts to this end as well.